

The dome church of les Invalides

In 1676, Louvois brings in the architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart to achieve the construction of Saint-Louis des Invalides' church. He extends the nave, which is called "soldiers' church" nowadays, into an impressive royal chapel called "the Dome church".

The object itself

The building rests on a nearly square basis, and is covered by a terrace topped by a dome which rests on a tambour. The south-facing front of the building is preceded by a salient frontispiece, which constitutes the monumental entrance of the royal church. It is structured by a strong cornice and a set of columns, lined up and stacked up, with their architectural order changing at each level. The pediment which caps the front gate brings up the glance towards the dome. On both sides of the entrance, the big statues of Saint-Louis by Nicolas Coustou and Charlemagne by Coysevox are an introduction to the ornamental discourse.



Dôme of les Invalides facade © Musée de l'Armée, RMN-GP.

The tambour consists of two levels of unequal heights. The second level of the tambour has small windows which are invisible from inside the building : as part of an ingenious system of embedded cupolas, they light up the painting on the upper dome. The dome itself is capped by a small lantern, carrying a spire decorated with fleurs-de-lis topped with a cross. The building as a whole soars skywards and reaches 101 meters (331,4 feet). The patterned, golden roof highlights the impression of lightness and emphasizes the cross on the top of it. The royal church remained the highest building in Paris until the Eiffel tower was built.

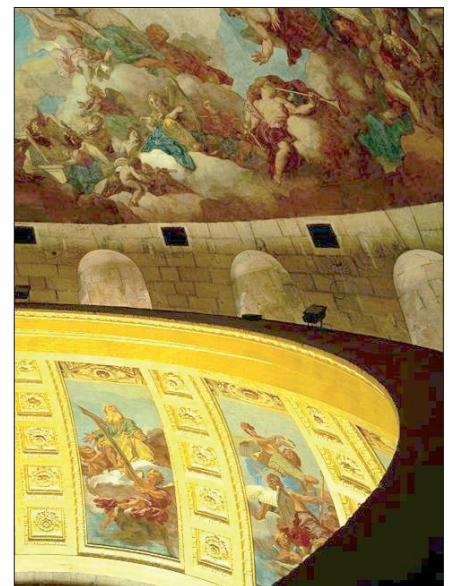


Dôme of Les Invalides' model scale (1/100) by P. Velu. Inv. 997.761 © Musée de l'Armée, RMN-GP.

The inner surface has been greatly modified, from 1842 to 1853, by the digging of the excavation and the erection of the great altar along with its canopy, as part of Napoleon's tomb. However, the initial pattern, which consists of a central space in the shape of a Greek cross delimiting four side chapels, is still perceptible.

Before the construction of the glass wall, in 1873, the choir was common to both churches ; the sovereign and the invalids could thus attend the same office separately.

Both the inside and the outside decoration follow the same symbolic pattern, which is to celebrate the alliance of the French monarchy with the Roman Catholic Church.



Between the two levels of the cupola © Musée de l'Armée, RMN-GP.



Inside the Dôme des Invalides © Musée de l'Armée, RMN-GP.

Inside, even if the stonework prevails in the lower parts, the painting on the embedded cupolas immediately catches the glance.

The inner cupola, with its hollow center, is divided into twelve parts, each of which is dedicated to an apostle, painted by Jouvenet. They form a kind of visual pedestal for Charles de la Fosse's impressive composition which adorns the higher cupola : "entering glory, among the angels, Saint Louis presents his crown, his sword and his arms to the Christ".

At the bottom of the tambour, a frieze decorated with fleurs-de-lis presents twelve portraits of kings of France, starting with Clovis up to Louis the 14th. Walls and floors repeatedly show the king's personal and dynastic symbols, as well as references to Saint Louis.

The object tells us...



Jules Hardouin-Mansart.
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Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646 - 1708) is a young, well-known architect when Louvois asks him to design a monumental church for the Invalides, since Bruant, previously in charge of the construction work, failed to do so. Hardouin-Mansart quickly responds by adapting an uncompleted project of a funeral chapel designed by his great-uncle François Mansart for the Bourbons in Saint-Denis. Hardouin-Mansart builds on what's already there : Bruant's nave remains, with its north entrance allowing the old soldiers daily worship, while the king has his own grandiose access on the south side.

The most renowned artists are hired and conducted by Girardon and Le Brun, before Hardouin-Mansart imposes a new generation of artists, of which Coysevox, Coustou, de la Fosse and Jouvenet are the most significant.

The symbolic program presents several variations on a same, uniting theme : the king of France gets his power directly from God ; the oldness and continuity of the

dynasty he is tied to are a testimony of his exceptional status. This is the core conception of the monarchy by divine right. The king, God's lieutenant on earth, is commissioned to defend the true faith, that is to say the catholic religion. As his ancestor and model, Saint Louis, Louis the 14th has to hunt down heresy : in 1685, he revokes the Nantes edict, wrongly believing it would bring an end to Protestantism in the kingdom. The Church's fathers are regularly evoked, for instance in the angle chapels. Clovis, king of the Franks, illustrates dynastic longevity and catholic oldness. Charlemagne associates the kings of France, by the rights of inheritance and age, to the imperial prestige, placing them above all the other sovereigns of Europe, as Louis the 14th underlines it in his *Memoirs for the instruction of the Dauphin* : "I, therefore, see no reason, my son, why kings of France, kings by inheritance who can boast that, nowhere else in the world, nowadays, a better house than their own, nor an older monarchy, nor a greater power, nor a more absolute power – why they should be less considered than those elective princes", namely the Habsburg, emperors of the Roman Germanic Holy empire, who are elected, not hereditary.

Construction works last for about thirty years, delayed and limited by financial constraints caused by the constant wars of the kingdom. Hence, Hardouin-Mansart has to give up his project of a great square surrounded in part by a colonnade, next to the south side of the building, which would have completed the access to the royal church.



Inside the Dôme des Invalides, with Napoleon's tomb
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